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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 002750

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SUBJECT: TAIWAN ASSERTS VATICAN SUBTLY SIGNALING BEIJING

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas H. Paal, Reason 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Taiwan officials contend that the Holy See and Pope Benedict XVI are subtly encouraging Beijing to resume an official dialogue, which was suspended by the PRC in 2000. While there has been no progress in the deadlock over Beijing's refusal to allow the Vatican complete jurisdiction over the Catholic Church in the PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officials say the Vatican's refusal to allow President Chen Shui-bian to attend Pope Benedict XVI's inauguration and the Pope's speech encouraging a more open foreign policy were intended to placate Beijing. Taipei-based Vatican officials maintain that Pope Benedict XVI's approach towards Beijing is consistent with the Holy See's long-standing policy to recognize Beijing and characterize the widespread media speculation surrounding Vatican-PRC ties as sensationalist. MOFA and Vatican officials do agree, however, that a near-term breakthrough in Holy See-Beijing relations is unlikely and that Taipei's diplomatic ties with the Holy See will remain stable in the near term. End summary.

Vatican Has Long Sought PRC Ties

12. (C) The Vatican has long sought to reestablish diplomatic relations with the PRC since Beijing severed ties with the Holy See in 1949. The Vatican's Charge d' Affairs in Taipei, Monsignor Ambrose Madtha, told AIT that he is puzzled by the media's speculation that the new Pope Benedict XVI, is pursuing a new policy to recognize Beijing. Madtha noted that it was the PRC that severed diplomatic ties with the Vatican and it was Beijing that cut off dialogue with the Holy See in 2000. Madtha remarked that the Holy See has always wanted and needs diplomatic ties with Beijing for the sake of the Church's estimated 10 million Catholics in the PRC. While the Holy See appreciates Taiwan's human rights record and its democratic government, Madtha explained, there are only about 300,000 Catholics in Taiwan. He pointed out that Pope John Paul II always wanted to open up diplomatic ties with the PRC and had hoped to travel to Beijing to achieve a breakthrough.

13. (C) Madtha dismissed the wave of media reports of impending changes in PRC-Vatican relations and complained about coverage of Hong Kong Bishop Zen's comments regarding the Vatican's desire to recognize the PRC. Madtha asserted that the press had misinterpreted Bishop Zen's comments and that his views simply were a reiteration of long-standing Vatican policies towards the PRC. Madtha also criticized the media's reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's inaugural speech, in which the Pope said that the Holy See is eager to recognize nations that have not yet established ties with the Vatican. Madtha argued that the media exaggerated the story and insisted that the Pope's remarks merely reaffirmed the Vatican's long-standing policy of maintaining diplomatic ties with all nations around the world, including the PRC.

MOFA Sees Subtle Vatican Hints

14. (C) MOFA officials insist, however, that the Holy See and Pope Benedict XVI are sending subtle signals to the PRC that the time is right to renew talks over diplomatic recognition. MOFA's Director General for European Affairs, Larry Wang, told AIT that it is no secret that the Vatican wishes to renew diplomatic ties with Beijing because of the large number Catholics in the PRC. Wang noted that the Holy See allowed President Chen to remain in the Vatican for only one day to attend Pope John Paul II's funeral. In addition, Wang said that the Holy See asked President Chen and other senior Taiwan officials not to attend the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI "for the sake of future Vatican-Taiwan relations." Wang insisted that these restrictions on Taiwan were intended to send a message to Beijing. So, too, the Vatican's Foreign Minister Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo's statement on June 23 that there are no insurmountable difficulties in reestablishing ties with the PRC, appears to reinforce that message to Beijing.

15. (C) Wang added that while official Vatican policy toward Beijing remains unchanged, Beijing likely views Pope Benedict

XVI as more moderate than Pope John Paul II. Wang pointed out that Pope Benedict XVI is focused on fundamental Church reform in contrast to Pope John Paul II's mission to combat communism and encourage human rights around the world. Wang also argued that Pope Benedict XVI's inaugural speech signaled a new opening in the Holy See's foreign policy strategy. As a result, Wang assessed that the Holy See's steps could create a new PRC perception of the Holy See that could lead to a renewed dialogue and possibly eventual compromise on the critical issue of Vatican control of Church affairs in the PRC. Wang noted that Taiwan's Legislative Yuan in May recalled Taiwan's Ambassador to the Vatican back to Taipei to report on the status of Taiwan's relationship with the Vatican and to answer questions.

16. (C) The main roadblock to PRC-Vatican ties remains the issue of the Holy See's authority over the Catholic Church in the PRC and its jurisdiction over the Bishop appointment process. The Holy See's Madtha explained that under Vatican law, the Congregation for Bishops appoint all Bishops and the Holy See has ultimate authority over Church affairs worldwide. Madtha told AIT that Beijing claims this is unacceptable interference in its internal affairs and has refused to cede Church control or the authority to appoint Bishops to the Holy See. Madtha opined that the PRC is fearful the Vatican would have too much authority and influence. He told AIT that the Holy See has tried to assure Beijing without success that all candidates for Bishop undergo a thorough selection and review process to ensure they are qualified for the position and that the Church is not a political entity.

But Vatican-PRC Deal Not Imminent  
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17. (C) MOFA's Wang told AIT that while he expects Beijing and the Holy See to resume a dialogue in the near term, it will take considerable time before they achieve an agreement to establish diplomatic relations. He said that Taipei's Ambassador to the Holy See recently met with the Vatican's Foreign Minister Archbishop Lajolo and was told that Taiwan-Vatican ties are stable. Wang noted that Taiwan had just moved into a new building in Vatican City, signing a 12 year lease with the Holy See and hoped that this reflected the stability of their ties. Wang acknowledged, however, that the Holy See told Taiwan that it fully intends to switch diplomatic ties when Beijing accepts Vatican authority, but promised to keep Taiwan informed so that recognition of the PRC will not, when the time comes, be a surprise.

18. (C) The Vatican's Madtha offered a similar assessment and told AIT that he does not expect Beijing and the Vatican to reach an agreement in the near term. No informal dialogue exists at this time, he noted, since Beijing broke off discussions in 2000 and as far as he knows, the PRC has not taken any steps to resume the dialogue or compromise on its positions regarding Vatican control of the Church. Even when a dialogue is re-established, Madtha stated that it will still take time to resolve the outstanding issues. While he has no solid information on a time-line, he noted that some China watchers have speculated that perhaps the PRC will make a move in 2008 to accept some of the Vatican's conditions for recognition.

Comment: Taiwan Has Few Options  
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19. (C) Despite the Vatican's praise of Taiwan's democracy and its human rights record, it is only a matter of time before the Holy See establishes diplomatic ties with the PRC. MOFA is pessimistic about the long term prospects for Taiwan-Vatican relations, particularly given the Holy See's decision to block President Chen from attending the Pope Benedict XVI's inauguration. Although Taiwan's relations with the Holy See are largely symbolic, they have long been a source of pride for Taiwan and is very important for the government as it is Taipei's only diplomatic partner in Europe. Although the question of when Beijing and the Holy See will resume diplomatic ties remains uncertain, what is certain is that Taiwan has been relegated to a spectator and must stand idly by while the PRC and the Vatican determine Taipei's diplomatic fate.  
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